

# Taking Notes in Genealogy

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Almost anyone can sit down with a pencil and paper and start copying information, but it pays to be extra careful when you're doing genealogical research. Repeating research because you can't read or understand your notes is no fun. Following the tips listed below should help you avoid any note-taking pitfalls.

**Write everything down.** The amount of information you collect will grow rapidly. If you try to rely on your memory, you may easily forget or become confused. This also applies to those who insist that they will "write it down later", which often leads to more errors.

**Don't use homespun abbreviations.** Abbreviations are often confusing when you go back to review your notes. They also can lead to inaccurate information. Use standard abbreviations (b for born, d for died, m for married).

**Record your sources.** If you write down the name, location, and the date that you searched each source, you can easily return to that source later and you'll always know what sources you've already checked. It's helpful to keep a different list of sources for each person (or each last name) in your family tree. Many genealogy programs include a sources/notes field for most dates and events that you record. You may also want to use a pen and paper or spreadsheet software to create a research log.

**Record each person's name in full.** It's especially important to list a woman's maiden name. Be sure to avoid abbreviations here; you may have more than one J. Smith within your family. If a person has a nickname, put it between quotation marks (e.g., "Tip").

**Be careful with dates.** Most genealogists use a day/month/year format. The actual format you use is not as important as spelling out the month and using the complete year. Dates can be ambiguous, you can interpret the date 4/7/76 as April 7 or 4 July 1976 (or 1876, or 1776, etc.). Writing out the month and year reduces the chance of misinterpreting dates no matter what format you use. Many genealogy software programs convert all dates to the style you choose and will also accept double dates (4 July 1976).

**Copy information--especially dates, locations, and last names--exactly as you find it.** You can interpret your findings later when you have time to review your notes and make comparisons with other information. This is particularly important when copying down last names. Over time they often take on many spellings. In general, never change information to what you think it ought to be.

**Take notes in such a way that they'll be understandable to you, or anyone else, when reviewed later.** The hastily written note often makes sense at the time you write it, but can be really confusing when you look at it days later.

**Write clearly.** If you've ever read old records, you know how frustrating it can be trying to decipher someone's handwriting. Write legibly today so that others will be able to read the information tomorrow...or 50 years from now.